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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines prisons as organizations and prisons as cultures, for as J. M. Shafritz and J. S. Ott (1992) point out, "a strong organizational culture literally controls organizational behavior." The review investigates the research of prison, organizational, and communication scholars to see how prison cultures shape inmate behavior and inhibit an inmate's desire to rehabilitate. An interpretive stance was taken with the literature review, since this was seen as an approach that could explain and critique the subjective and shared meanings that constitute reality. The research examined, however, has not explained why prison cultures form; most of the research on prison cultures looks at some aspect of socialization or the use of socialized roles. Strong negative attitudes against training in general are evident, and it is not difficult to imagine why some training programs in prisons fail miserably. Further study should be undertaken on prison cultures because a better understanding of inmate behavior could result in lower recidivism rates. However, there seem to be many prison-related "cultural" barriers that hinder rehabilitative efforts. Future research could identify and explain these barriers to help lower their negative effect on the desire to rehabilitate. An interpretive approach coupled with more quantitative methods will strengthen the value of the results. (Contains 32 references.) (NKA)

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Prisons as Organizational Cultures: A Literature Review of a Vastly Unexplored Organizational Communication Setting

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Abstract

This study discusses the literature on prisons as organizations and on prisons as cultures, for as Shafritz and Ott point out, "a strong organizational culture literally controls organizational behavior" (1992, p. 482). This analysis may foster an understanding of inmate behavior as it relates to recidivism (return to prison) rates. The writings of prison, organizational and communication scholars are examined to see how prison cultures inhibit an inmate's desire to rehabilitate. Implications for the reduction of recidivism are discussed.

Prisons as Organizational Cultures: A Literature Review of a Vastly Unexplored Organizational Communication Setting

By all accounts, the rate of recidivism, or return to prison, has risen alarmingly over the past few decades. Prisons are now facing serious overcrowding conditions (Fletcher, Moon, & Shaver, in press), as many former inmates return to prison time and again.

The opposing administrative goals of custody and treatment further complicate the matter, for taxpayer money must be divided between the two, and neither administration can be called into full accountability as a result (Cressey, 1965; Garrity, 1961; McCorkle, 1993; Thomas & Petersen, 1977; Torok, 1974). Without accountability, prisons can remain inefficient and ineffective and still receive funding (Thomas & Peterson, 1977). Thus, prisons continue to function, inmates continue to reenter society with ineffective or inadequate training, and they continue to recidivate as the cycle perpetuates itself.

What causes inmate training to miss its mark? And why look at prisons as organizations and as cultures? As Shafritz and Ott point out, "a strong organizational culture literally controls organizational behavior" (1992, p. 482). Perhaps one key to interpreting inmate behavior as it relates to recidivism lies in an understanding of this inmate organizational culture. A first step will be to explore organizational matters in greater detail.

What Are Organizations?

Definitions

As long as organizations have been the serious focus of study, new and variant definitions of them have arisen over time (Redding, 1985; Redding and Tompkins, 1988). This survey will highlight a few that will serve the purpose at hand.

Hall (1991) says, "An organization is a collectivity with a relatively identifiable boundary, a normative order, ranks of authority, communications systems, and membership coordinating systems." He goes on to say "this collectivity exists on a relatively continuous basis in an environment and engages in activities that are usually related to a set of goals; the activities have outcomes for organizational members, the organization itself, and for society" (p. 32). This is a rather complete definition.

Strother (as cited in Littlejohn, 1989) sees them as "two or more people involved in a cooperative relationship" (p. 225). He claims that they have goals and functions, hierarchical and communicative structures, and are affected by their environment.

Weick takes a different stance and describes organizations as "socially constructed realities constituted in communication" (Bantz 1989, p. 95). This is an interpretive (explains and critiques the subjective and shared meanings that constitute reality) view rather than a more traditional systems view (Putnam, 1983, p. 32).

The definitions that follow share this same interpretive approach.

Smircich (1992), for example, asserts that organizations exist as systems of shared meanings that are developed and sustained by symbolic processes (p. 520). This symbolic process is accomplished through the communication of shared meanings.

Etzioni (1964, as cited in Hall, 1991, p. 30) focuses instead on goals, stating "Organizations are social units (or human groupings) deliberately constructed and reconstructed to seek specific goals." He adds, "Corporations, armies, schools, hospitals, churches, and prisons are included." Scott (1964, also cited in Hall, 1991) expands on Etzioni's work by saying that organizations are more than just goals and continuity. He states, "These include relatively fixed boundaries, a normative order, authority ranks, a communication system, and an incentive system which enables various types of participants to work together in the pursuit of common goals" (p. 31). In sum, by these definitions, prisons can be classified as organizations that use communication.

History of Organizational Communication Field.

Given the preceding statement, one would expect that prisons would be routinely studied within the young field of organizational communication. However, a look at some of the seminal historical pieces in that area by scholars such as Redding (1985), Redding and Tompkins (1988), and Putnam and Cheney

(1995), all indicate that this is not so. Nowhere in this literature or in the more current historical summary of West-Gray, Center, Brashers, and Meyers (1991) is there any mention of the study of prisons as organizations using communication.

Further, scholars such as Cressey, Goffman, Clemmer, Galtung, McLeery, Weber, Wheeler, Schrag, Garrity, or Scratton who did the early theoretical work in this area (Cressey, 1961) and later theorists such as Katz and Kahn, Etzioni, and Street, Vinter, and Perrow (Duffee, 1975) were similarly absent from these historical pieces. This prompted the current search for an accounting in a related field, the field of organizational theory.

History of Organizational Theory

Shafritz and Ott (1992) provide a current and thorough presentation of the classics of organizational theory. Their account, documenting organizational topics, approaches, and scholars from ancient history to the present, likewise does not mention either the study of prisons as organizations or the theorists involved in such research. It appears that prisons are likewise out of the purview of this field.

Are Prisons Organizations?

Despite the lack of inclusion of prison research in the fields of organizational communication or organizational theory, a body of literature does exist that clearly views prisons as communicative

organizations. Goffman (as cited in Heffernan, 1972, p. 3) speaks of them as "total institutions" in a social organization, and says that the prison is a "place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." Katz and Kahn, Etzioni, and Street, Vinter, and Perrow also assume that prisons are organizations (Duffee, 1975) and conduct research accordingly.

Within this largely unclassified body of literature, prisons are studied in great detail. Of particular interest is the communicative-organizational accomplishment of an inmate culture (Thomas and Peterson,1975) and its repercussions. It is to this accomplishment that attention is now focused.

What are Organizational Communication Cultures?

Unlike the study of prisons, the study of cultures has been of considerable interest to organizational communication scholars since at least 1973, when Clifford Geertz's anthropological view of societies (as systems of shared symbols and meanings) led to a conception of organizations as "discourses" and communication as "the process of organizing" (Hawes, 1974, as cited in Putnam & Cheney, 1985, p. 148). This symbolic perspective has stimulated much research in organizational communication, particularly for those using the non-traditional, primarily qualitative interpretive

approach (Smircich, 1983a, cited in Putnam & Cheney, 1985).

As an anthropological concept, culture was first cast as a socially accomplished collective sense of reality, group norms, and group membership. Pacanowski and Trujillo (1983) made the further distinction that "communication is not information transfer but language use" (p. 149). To them, cultures are performances that are accomplished communicatively, and the best way to study them is in their natural settings.

Schein (1992) gives a much fuller definition of an (organizational communication) culture as, "a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration." He goes on to say that this pattern "has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 494). He expands on the definition in the following passage:

> Culture should be viewed as a property of an independently defined stable social unit. That is, if one can demonstrate that a given set of people have shared a significant number of important experiences in the process of solving external and internal problems, one can assume that such common experiences have led them, over time, to a shared view of the

> world around them and their place in it. There has to have been enough shared experience to have led to a shared view, and this shared view has to have worked for long enough to have come to be taken for granted and to have dropped out of awareness. Culture, in this sense, is a learned product of group experience and is therefore, to be found only where there is a definable group with a significant history. (p. 493).

Are Prisons Organizational Cultures?

Evidence

By the preceding accounts, a prison is an ideal place for culture as a "learned product of a group experience" to form. Louis (1982, citing Schutz, 1964; Van Maanen, 1977; and Louis, 1980 a, 1980 b) adds weight to that claim by insisting that "learning the ropes" is also evidence of some cultural stratum, particularly if mastery is critical for the well-functioning of new organizational members (p. 569). That "learning the ropes" is an essential aspect of prison survival is abundantly evident in the literature on prisons and prison socialization (Dimick, 1979; Heffernan, 1972).

Further, by using Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), a person could document evidences of such culture within prisons by visiting them and experiencing them firsthand. Heffernan (1972, p. 2) captures the colorful words of a conscientious objector imprisoned

during World War II as he makes a related suggestion:

> If you want to understand the prison system I suggest that you go out and commit a "crime" - something like robbing a bank, which might be a commendable thing to do from a moral standpoint, and to which there is attached a fairly strong social stigma. Thus, you wouldn't miss the full flavor of the experience of going through the courts and the prison. . . . You have my best wishes that you'll turn up something of value. I do think, though, that you ought to rob a bank.

While this sort of total dedication to inquiry is not being recommended in this paper, the words do speak to the issue of seeing evidences of the culture in the culture itself. Short of that, one can read of them in well over 200 studies written before 1977 and many more written since that time (Thomas & Peterson, 1977).

Why Prison Cultures Form

Two prevailing theories that attempt an explanation are the deprivation and the importation models. Thomas and Peterson (1977) credit a number of early theorists with the first explanation, most notably Goffman (1961 a, 1961 b), Sykes (1958), and Sykes and Messinger, (1960). This model claims that "as deprivations which are imposed become more pronounced, so does the probability that an inmate subculture will emerge." This subculture will place a premium on attitudes, values, and

behaviors that are subversive to the goals of the prison (p. 50).

While it seemed a good first explanation, numerous criticisms concerning its failure to include influential external factors led to the second explanation, the importation model. Thomas and Peterson (1977) credit Clemmer (1940, 1950), Schrag (1944, 1961) and others with its initial formulation, which claims that in addition to deprivations, inmates "import" criminal values from their pre-prison social lives (p. 53).

As with the earlier model, this explanation is again too simplistic. Many questions remain to be answered, and perhaps a new theory needs to be formulated. To this effect, Thomas and Peterson (1977, p. 57) themselves note:

> "... given the structure of most colleges and universities, you have far more in common than you might think with the inmates of many prisons. Obviously, and not unlike inmates, what you are and what you do is not totally determined by the organization of which you are a part, but your experience as a student, ... your attitudes and behavior, ... your past experiences, ... your expectations about your future, ... and your immediate problems and pressures. In other words, inmates, not really so unlike the rest of us, adjust to confinement the way they do for all kinds of reasons.

Thus, research has not explained why prison cultures fo m.

Culture and the Cycle of Recidivism

It is in the analysis of the features of prison cultures that one can most clearly see why they may hold one key to reversing the cycle of recidivism. As was discussed earlier, many prisons are characterized by ineffective or inadequate training. Even back in 1944, prison officials recognized the need to motivate inmates to want to make a change and to want to learn (Gallup, 1944, p. 12).

In hindsight, perhaps motivation alone without work on enhancing self esteem or work on breaking negative sanctions against training was not enough. While discussing the value of targeting self-esteem in inmate training programs would be interesting and perhaps fruitful, it is outside the scope of this analysis. Breaking negative social sanctions, however, is not. To get at that, a look at male-female differences, inmate concerns, socialized roles, and features of a prison culture is in order.

Male-Female Differences

Because the study of male inmate behavior has literally dominated the field of prison research since its inception, Lotze (1977, p. 3, as cited in Simon & Landis, 1991, p. 108) notes that "purportedly general theories of criminal deviance are now no more than special theories of male deviance."

This same limitation has also been noted in the area of

adaptive inmate behavior (Dimick, 1979; Heffernan, 1972) and social-sexual roles (Sieverdes & Bartollas, 1982). Thus, while the focus of this study will be on the general behaviors that apply to both male and female inmates, it must be noted that marked differences between the two inmate populations do exist.

Sieverdes and Bartollas (1982, p. 204) list early researchers such as Ward and Kassebaum (1965), Giallombardo (1974), and Heffernan (1972) who have studied women inmates. A careful reading of this research will delineate some behavioral differences.

Inmate Concerns

Toch (1992) classified the eight basic concerns of inmates as concerns for privacy, safety, structure, support, emotional feedback, social stimulation, activity, and freedom (pp. 21-22). His recent book speaks to the ecology of survival and to the inmates' needs to interact with the environment in order to adapt. One way of adapting he says, is to find or create a "nitch" in prison, or as Goffman (1961, p. 58) would say, a place to accomplish "situational withdrawal." Another way to adapt is to integrate into the inmate culture by assuming one of the many socialized roles.

Socialized Roles

Most of the research on prison cultures looks at some aspect of socialization or the use of socialized roles. These are adaptive roles common to the culture. Sieverdes and Bartollas (1982) trace

the history of this research, citing Reimer's seminal work in 1937, Clemmer's in 1940, Schrag's in 1954 and 1961, Sykes' in 1958, and Garabedian's in 1963. They also cite works by the researchers on female inmate populations which have been previously listed, and many researchers on juvenile training school roles as well (p. 205).

By using prison argot (slang), colorful descriptions of these socialized roles greatly facilitate understanding. Names such as "square john," "right guy," "tough," "merchant," "gorilla," "butch," "snitcher," "homey," "square," and dozens more are representative of such argot roles (Sieverdes and Bartollas, 1982).

Heffernan (1972) discovered perhaps the three most common argot roles (both for inmates and staff) in "the square," "the cool," and "the life." The square are those who are model prisoners, the cool are those who follow some of the rules and have a large social support system "on the outside," and the life are those who have made a life out of living in prison. Torok (1974) calls the last group those who are "doing time on the installment plan" (p. 42).

Once socialized into a role or safely "niched" out of all three through some form of isolation, behavior patterns take on somewhat predictable characteristics. When this occurs, breaking negative sanctions so to meet treatment or training goals can be very difficult. Sensitivity, savvy, determination, and a thorough knowledge of human nature should all be set to the task.

Features of a Prison Culture

Heffernan's 1972 book entitled Making it in Prison: The Square, the Cool, and the Life" (from which this section is principally derived) is devoted in large part to an explanation of several common features of a prison culture. Generally, inmates must negotiate their physical space, daily schedule, social economic structures, contraband systems, hustling techniques, communication with "the outside," rumor networks, prison rules, inconsistent treatment, time to be served, socialized roles, agreed-upon privileges, and negative sanctions on a daily basis.

Inmates generally have limited physical space, a continual lack of privacy, and little control over the visual or verbal "noise" in the environment. They must learn to negotiate their space to comply with the letter and timing of the daily schedule, which often includes up to nine "counts" a day (p. 56).

"Getting by" in the system for inmates socialized as "the cool" and "the life" usually involves an understanding of the social economic structures, the contraband systems, and trusted hustling techniques. Because prison wages are so low, inmates frequently resort to illegal bartering of stolen or concealed goods and hustling crafts for food or cigarettes. These options are not available for "the square," who usually stay very poor (p. 71).

Communication with the "outside," and rumor networks

such as the "I say, you say" are also a part of prison life for many inmates. While "the square" may not often participate in either activity, most have an awareness them. In the institution that Heffernan studied, "kites" or hand-held notes were passed to "the outside" (p.75) while the "I say, you say" (p. 69) functioned as an internal underground communication system. Heffernan notes that these types of communication networks are common in prisons, though they may be called by different names.

Prisoners must also negotiate prison rules, inconsistent treatment, and time to be served. Time to be served is frequently difficult to for an inmate to determine because of the confusing system of good time and lost time (p. 57). Similarly, the rule structure can also be inconsistent. One female inmate interviewed by Heffernan (1972, p. 61) described just this sort of the rule inconsistency at her institution:

> Nobody tells you the rules - and the ones on the walls aren't the ones. You never know quite what they are. You've got one set at 7 a.m., another at 3:30, and another at midnight. [Shift change times] They should all get together, go up and get them approved, type them out, and hang them up - especially for us long timers. You know that in all my times here, no officer has ever told me a rule first; I've learned them from the women, first this one, and then that.

Socialized roles (as discussed earlier), agreed-upon privileges, and negative sanctions must also be negotiated. Even "the square" must pay attention to these because of possible negative consequences resulting from social sanctions.

With agreed-upon privileges, for example, "the square," like the others quickly learn that some can always "use the sinks first, some always sit in certain chairs directly in front of the T.V., some pick the first row of chairs of the stage to view the movies, some can sit at certain tables in the dining room. . ." (Heffernan, p. 71). Of this curious practice she adds, "If undisturbed, the real order may remain almost unseen and unrecognized. However, a deliberate challenge or an accidental assault . . . results in verbal or physical conflict, which the chain of 'I say, you say' carries to its farthest listener."

Given such careful attention to such minute detail, and given the strong negative attitudes against training in general, it is not difficult to imagine why some training programs in prisons fail miserably. A thorough understanding of the prison culture in question may be a valuable tool for those attempting to stem the rising tide of recidivism.

Such an understanding of this unique culture may be greatly assisted by taking an interpretive approach to research on the question, as the next section more fully explains.

Why Use the Interpretive Frame of Reference?

A first look at the interpretive stance was taken earlier in the paper. It was seen as a approach that could explain and critique the subjective and shared meanings that constitute reality. More specifically, the interpretive approach seeks to understand "socially constructed reality" as it is accomplished by those in the culture over time (Putnam, 1983; Weick, 1983).

It is this focus on in-depth understanding (with typically qualitative, naturalistic methods) rather than on prediction and control (with typically variable-analytic methods) that makes the interpretive approach so appropriate for research on organizational communication cultures (Putnam, 1983) such as prisons.

By being in the setting and using more naturalistic methods such as ethnographies, participant observation, intensive case studies, and in-depth interviews; richer, thicker descriptions of inmate behavior and cultures may be possible (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1991; Weick, 1983). It is also the pursuit of these richer descriptions that makes the interpretive approach so appealing for this type of work.

Shafritz & Ott (1992, p. 481) state that the cultural perspective was originally designed as an alternative to quantitative, quasi-experimental, logical-positivistic research designs and assumptions. It should be noted that this perspective

has routinely used the interpretive approach. Because this is so, a call for its use in future (prison) cultural studies would be quite consistent with tradition. In sum, greater in-depth understanding, richer qualitative descriptions, and consistency with common cultural research assumptions all combine to explain the preference for this frame of reference to study inmate cultures and their possible effect on rising recidivism rates.

Discussion

This study discussed the literature on prisons as "organizations" and "cultures" because of the perceived power of such cultures to shape inmate behavior. It was hoped that a better understanding of inmate behavior, particularly as it related to recidivism rates, would result.

There seem to be many prison-related "cultural" barriers that hinder rehabilitative efforts. These barriers need further study. Future research could identify and explain them so to lower their negative effect on the desire to rehabilitate. An interpretive approach coupled with more quantitative methods should be part of the design. This triangulation of methods will strengthen the value of the results (Frey, Botan, Friedman, & Kreps, 1991).

The rising rate of recidivism is a serious matter, and inmate cultures have the potential to undermine inmate training. More research is needed in this area. The time to begin is now.

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